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THE REINVENTION OF THE OLD, ACCORDING TO VINCENT VAN GOGH

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Synopsis A study on the special importance given by Vincent van Gogh to painting from previous centuries.
Keywords Vincent van Gogh; Émile Bernard; Johannes Vermeer; Rogier van der Weyden.
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Apparently characterized by a dominant intuitive spontaneity, the works of Vincent van Gogh seem, therefore, to fall outside the scope adopted here, so they have never attracted particular attention. However, a recent online program has drawn attention to the actually rational and well-planned nature of his works, something that proves to be relevant[1].

This contribution aims to reinforce and develop this perspective, particularly by focusing on the inspiration given by the masters of the past, including for unexpected images.

This is the case with a photograph from 1886 involving his friend and fellow painter Émile Bernard and a third, more distant figure, in a carefully crafted scenic composition.

Vincent van Gogh and Émile Bernard, Asnières-sur-Seine [commons.wikimedia.org].
Johannes Vermeer, *The Art of Painting* (det.), Künsthistorisches Museum [commons.wikimedia.org/GoogleArtProject].

1 See *Stories of Art* / HENI Talks; episode "Vincent van Gogh: the outcast" (online).

Seated in the foreground with his back to the camera, Van Gogh immediately brings to mind his compatriot Vermeer in his studio. In turn, his friend Bernard plays the comical role of a "canvas" being painted by the modern Dutch artist.

This is a composition that satirizes Van Gogh's constant poverty[2], working in his "studio" on the banks of the river (evocative of the canals of Delft, Vermeer's city and the spiritual capital of the Netherlands, where William the Silent is buried).

Another image that deserves to be revisited in light of past references is the drawing known as *Pollardbirches and shepherd*.

Vincent van Gogh, *Pollardbirches and shepherd*, Van Gogh Museum [commons.wikimedia.org].

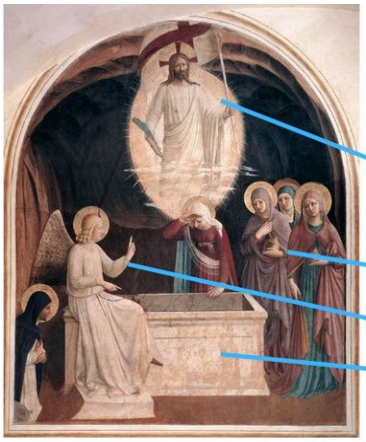
Here, the three trees in the foreground evoke the Crucifixion, with the central one naturally symbolizing the Messiah who, by dying and rising again, redeemed the mortal sin of Adam and Eve at the deadly tree of temptation[3].

Therefore, this central tree allegorizes both the tree of sin and the redeeming cross, as well as the bodily ascension to heaven after the Resurrection (the lower part of the trunk was even darkened to suggest the "uprooting" and elevation of the Tree of Life, i.e. Jesus Christ, ≈ Dove of the Holy Spirit).

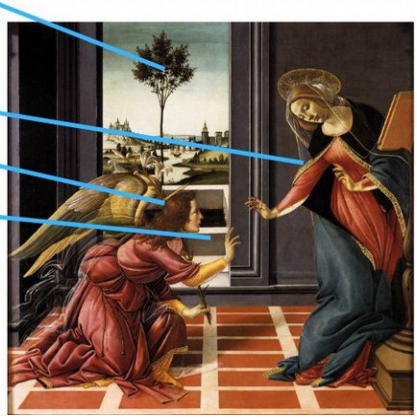
2 Furthermore, the building in the background has a sign painted on it that reads "Vins Restaurant," in an apparent parody of the name Vincent.

3 In addition to the theological connection, it was considered that even the wood of the redeeming cross itself came from the ancestral tree of original sin, a perspective that became fully rooted in the European artistic tradition and was originally popularized above all by the medieval hagiographer Jacobus de Voragine (see the chapters “La Passion du Seigneur” and “L’invention de la Sante Croix” in Voragine's *La Légende Dorée*, ed. E. Rouveyre, Paris, 1902, pp.398-399 (vol.1) and 52-53 (vol.2), respectively.

Comparative examples[4]



Fra Angelico, *Women at the empty tomb*, Museo Nazionale di San Marco [commons.wikimedia.org].



Sandro Botticelli, *Cestello Annunciation*, Uffizi Gallery [commons.wikimedia.org].
In this case, Botticelli's *Annunciation* also suggests the culminating Resurrection and Ascension of Christ (i.e. from his alpha to his omega), underlining the theological coherence of the composition.

In fact, when designing artistic pieces for Christian worship, it was very common for creators to devise compromise solutions and visual suggestions to introduce related biblical episodes. It was not uncommon to resort to anthropomorphic and/or zoomorphic devices, as can be seen, for example, in the painting commonly known as *Philosopher in Meditation*, conceived by Rembrandt[5].

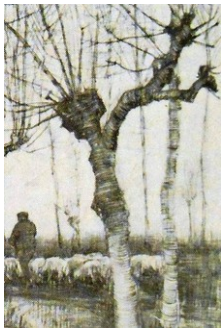
Rembrandt, *Philosopher in Meditation*, Louvre [commons.wikimedia.org].
Layer 1: The serpent of temptation that "swallowed" Adam (A) and Eve (E), keeping them in the underworld of death.
Layer 2: Jonah's redeeming whale, foreshadowing Christ's luminous victory over death (Mt.12:39-41; Lk.11:29-32; Christ as the saviour "New Adam", Rom.15:14; 1Cor.15:45).

4 For more on Botticelli's devices in the painting presented here, see the explanatory video *The shapes of Botticelli's Cestello Annunciation* [archive.org | youtube.com], or its pdf version / scrollable frames [academia.edu | archive.org].

5 Considering the significance of this painting, a better title would be something like *On the Human Condition.* Regarding its ingenuity, see *Octógono* extra ed. (27) / Feb.1, 2026 – "Rembrandt, the Philosopher and the redeeming whale" [academia.edu | archive.org]. Also in regard to this and other resourceful paintings, see *Jheronimus Bosch and the hidden devils of the Garden*, 2013, p.6 [academia.edu], collected in *Northern Art. Studies 2012-2016* [archive.org].

This type of device was also used by Van Gogh in his drawing shown above. Thus, if the central tree simultaneously symbolizes original sin and the Messiah who died and ascended to heaven (the Holy Trinity), the side trees, in contrast, have an anthropomorphic character, suggesting the two thieves and symbolizing their earthly nature.

But these two creatures are different from each other. The one next to the female figure (≈ a sinful and "straying" Eve) is a crucified figure with monstrous and deformed features, unlike the more humanized one found next to the male character (≈ Adam seeking redemption by imitating Christ as the good shepherd).

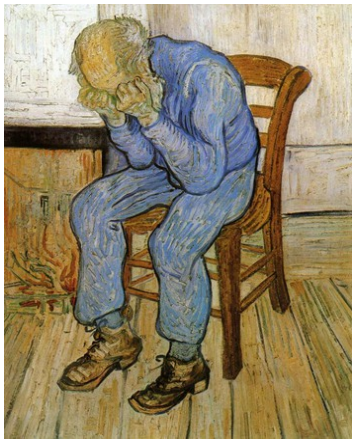


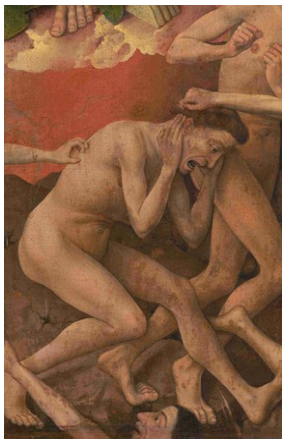
Vincent van Gogh, *Pollardbirches and shepherd*,
detail of the thief next to "Adam" [commons.wikimedia.org].

Albrecht Altdorfer, *Christ on the Cross between the Two Thieves,*
detail of one of the thieves,
Gemäldegalerie Berlin [commons.wikimedia.org].

In this respect, Van Gogh did not follow the general rule of considering the right and sinister sides from the perspective of the work itself. Instead, he opted for mirrored perspective (which corresponds to that of the viewer), as did, systematically or partially, a few but notable artists (e.g. Leonardo, Velázquez, Goya).

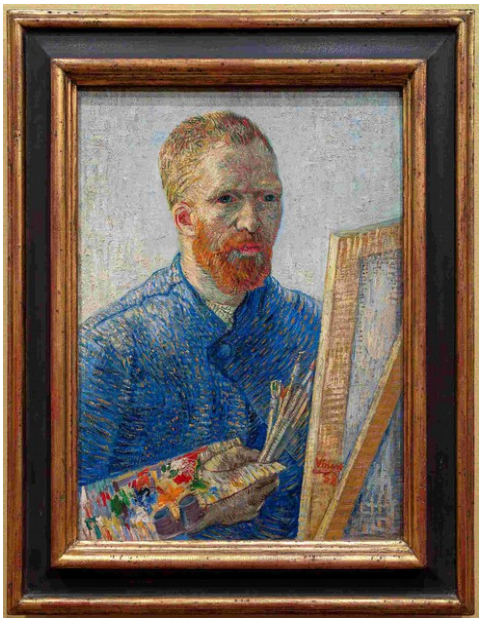
In other words, in this case the sinister side is indeed on the left from the observer's perspective, as can be seen in Van Gogh's drawing. This preference can even be confirmed in a composition where a desperate old man with a heavy conscience anticipates his imminent fate in the furnace.





Vincent Van Gogh, *Old man in sorrow* or *At Eternity's Gate*, Kröller-Müller Museum [commons.wikimedia.org].
Rogier van der Weyde, *Beaune Altapiece*, det. [commons.wikimedia.org/FactumFoundation].
In comparison, Rogier van der Weyden followed the more common approach, so his condemned man is also oriented towards the sinister side, but from the perspective of the composition itself.

In conclusion, just as his contemporary Nietzsche was versed in ancient Greek theater, so too did Vincent Van Gogh look at the paintings of the old masters and see in them not only the obvious forms, but also the underlying ingenuity.



Frans Badens, *St. Sebastian*, Musée Fesch [commons.wikimedia.org].
Vincent van Gogh, *Self-portrait as a painter*, Van Gogh Museum [commons.wikimedia.org/GoldenArtists].
Rogier van der Weyde, *Anthony of Burgundy*, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium [commons.wikimedia.org].